

Last week Jane spoke about living faith; that it is by our actions that our faith is revealed. Amen to that! Today, I am looking at joyful hope.

I read once that hope is the future tense of faith and I saw the truth of that statement in action 10 days ago at a funeral I took of a person who had recently passed her 105<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I've been given permission to use her name – Vera. For many years Peter, Moya and Pye had faithfully taking communion to Vera. More recently, Jon and I had also visited Vera to pray with her when she spoke openly about not being afraid of death.

Vera had planned her funeral service in great detail and it trumpeted the great and enduring faith she had possessed.

In words and music the service affirmed clearly and with great maturity that the mystery, purpose, necessity and challenge of Christ's passion was at the very heart of Vera's faith.

It spoke of her passing from this earthly life not as an end but merely the beginning of an eternal life with God, where she was, figuratively speaking, putting her hand into the hand of God as he led her into the light out of the darkness.

It spoke of the hope which is uniquely gifted to us through God's grace and the words of Jesus in John 11:

'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

That is the promise of Jesus to those who believe in him. He is offering us a hope of eternal life; even though we die, we will live.

And yet at every funeral it is inevitable that people will differ in the depth, strength and maturity of their faith. Indeed some may be there who have no faith.

In Dante's *The Inferno* we read of a sign over the gate to hell which says "Abandon all hope ye who enter here".....I would just love a sign to be put up above our glass porch doors which says .....“Be blessed with hope all ye who enter here” because we should proclaim loud and clear that believing in Christ means that there is hope in death as in life, and that there is new life in Christ after death.

St Paul in Romans 8 affirms this hope:

'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor ANYTHING ELSE in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Yet even those who share such faith will often find a real sense of loss at the death of a loved one. I know this from personal experience when my previous wife Dorcas died.

I was distraught; I was devastated; it was as if my whole world had come to an end.

And yet that certainty of hope expressed by St Paul was a constant reminder to me in those dark days that Christian hope is a cause for joy.

Eventually I came to understand that hope goes beyond the grave and that it makes a great deal of difference to the way in which we grieve. Now nearly 10 years on, I have left that dark place far

behind; my life is filled primarily with joy.

But at first I struggled with the idea of it being right that joy should stand so easily alongside not only my pain but alongside the suffering and pain so evident throughout this world in so many circumstances much more dire than those surrounding my grief.

As usual, John's gospel helped me. In Jesus' final discourse to his disciples he tells them joy is his gift to those who believe in him. Those same disciples grieved over his death, but when they see the risen Jesus - they rejoice.

Joyful hope now started to make sense and I realised that hope in God is basically another name for the joyful news of the gospel. Joy is mentioned 72 times in the gospels, exactly half of them in Luke – no wonder it is sometimes called the joyful gospel.

Let me jog your memory.

The birth of Christ is anticipated with Joy

- Mary visits Elizabeth and she tells of the baby in her womb 'leaping with joy'
- the angels bring news of great joy to the shepherds
- when the Magi see the star stopping over the stable they were overjoyed

During his ministry we hear of Jesus

- being full of joy through the Holy Spirit
  - telling his disciples they should be full of joy because their names are written in heaven
  - speaking in the parable of the Tenants he stresses 'the joy of the Lord'
- and of course he concludes our gospel reading of the Beatitudes with the words 'rejoice and be glad'

And if you think about it, the Beatitudes actually illustrate joyful hope. Whilst the first half of each beatitude depicts the present situation, the second half foretells the future.

One example to show what I mean:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth

'Blessed' means happy. Now some kill joys .....pun intended..... differentiate between joy and happiness, but there is no such distinction made in Scripture. If a person is joyful then he or she will be happy; there's no such thing as glum joy. We can't drain joy of emotion and still call it joy.

Those with humility, those without power or without status and who depend on God are blessed – they have reason to be happy because they will be given the Kingdom of God and inherit the earth....

there is the promise and the hope for those who believe; that no matter how inconsequential or dire their current situation might be, they have hope. Indeed joyful hope because of the wonderful, awesome future that awaits.

And that I think, is the crux to understanding joyful hope. We can not manufacture joy by ourselves; it is God's gift to us made available through the death and resurrection of Christ and sown within us by the Holy Spirit.

Sown within us to grow and flow through the outworking of our living faith. This means that even if

a Christian cannot rejoice given the immediate situation they find themselves in – just as I was unable to when widowed – they can still rejoice in Christ.

Biblical joy is bound up in our relationship with God the Father and through his Son Jesus Christ we are blessed whether we are poor in spirit....or mourn....or are meek....or hunger and thirst for righteousness etc.

This is what makes Christians unique; the hope of salvation and the knowledge and expectation that we shall live with God in joy for eternity.

That was the joyful hope I'm sure Vera tried to express at her funeral. And, I'm delighted to say that she succeeded because when I spoke to the family and friends afterwards several said they hadn't expected the occasion to be so uplifting.

Vera's coffin entered to the hymn Abide with Me. The hymn was written by Henry Francis Lyte.

Lyte wrote the poem in 1847 and set it to music while he lay dying from tuberculosis; he survived only a further three weeks after its completion.

We will stand to sing it shortly, and as we do please think about the words in the context of what Lyte may have hoped and what I have said.

Joyful hope. Maybe have concerns about joy and hope in your own faith or perhaps there is something bugging you about what I've said today. In which case, please come and have a coffee and chat with Jon or myself – it's one of the reasons why we are here.

But to end, and hopefully many years before it is the time for us to depart this earth I would like to ask Jon to bless us with Paul's words from Romans 15:

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'.